DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 009 CG 025 313

AUTHOR Scott, Hillary K.
TITLE Death Awareness among College Age Students.
PUB DATE 13 Dec 93
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) --
Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; *Death; Grief; Higher Education; *Student Attitudes; Surveys; Tables (Data)

ABSTRACT

Little research on death awareness (defined as the number of deaths experienced, frequency of thoughts about death, and awareness of a grief/mourning period) has been done and little is known about levels of awareness at different ages, though such knowledge would be valuable to bereavement counselors. Contrary to the hypothesis that college age students have a low level of death awareness, a survey of 64 college age students from a midwestern university revealed that they are moderately aware of death. The average number of deaths experienced was 5.16. The average number of students who reported thinking of their own death "once in awhile" was 81.3% and 76.6% remembered a period of mourning after a death, although most (73.3%) were unaware of any particular mourning process they had used in the past. Included is the survey. Contains 9 references. (Author/MSF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 370 009

Death Awareness Among College Age Students

Hillary K. Scott

Bowling Green State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

H. SCOTT

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Running head: DEATH AWARENESS AMONG STUDENTS

CG025313

Abstract

A survey, that measured, Death Awareness was completed by sixty-four college age students from a midwestern university. Death Awareness, as defined by the author, pertains to the number of deaths that have been experienced, the frequency of death thoughts, and the awareness of a grief/mourning period. The survey used was created by the author, and contained questions related to the definition of Death Awareness. The average number of deaths reported that were experienced was 5.16. The percentage of students who reported that they thought of their own death "once in a while," was 81.3%. The percentage of students who remembered a period of mourning after an experienced death was 76.6%, but 73.4% were not aware of any typical mourning process they have used in the past. Therefore, the author has concluded that college age students have a moderate level of Death Awareness, which was contrary to belief.

Death Awareness Among College Age Students

In today's society the topic of death is rarely discussed, let alone thought of. But, it is a fact of life everyone must face. How important is it to think about death; your own death or someone close to you? Bereavement counselors and grief workers have through the years stressed to importance of facing death (Aries, 1974; Becker, 1973; Marks & Calder, 1982; Prunkl & Berry, 1989; Stannard, 1975; Vickio, Cavanaugh, & Attig, 1990; Worden & Proctor, 1976; Zinner, 1985). Death is a subject (a fact of life) that will not be ignored. Death is something each individual will experience may times in his/her life. Death Awareness pertains to the experiences an individual encounters over his/her life time. The level of awareness is estimated from the number of deaths the individual has experienced (not literally), how often there are death thoughts, and the awareness of a mourning/grief period (Worden & Proctor, 1976). Given the fact that death is a touchy subject, very little research has been done on Death Awareness. Therefore, the awareness levels of the different ages is unknown. Do older people think of death more than

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

younger people? Do people who have known more people who have died think of death more? These are questions I hope to see answered in the future. For a bereavement counselor, the answers would be of big help when dealing with different ages.

There was a survey done by Amy Marks and Bobby Calder (1982) that looked into attitudes toward death and funerals. This survey revealed wonderful information regarding funeral attendance, funeral preferences, and opinions toward funerals in general. But, it gave no information regarding attitudes toward death. This survey was a prime example of not dealing with the real issue... Death.

In the book by Philippe Aries, he states that attitudes toward death have changed over the years (1974). The current attitudes toward death have to deal with fear, immortality, and ignorance. Despite this, the topic of death is being discussed more openly within the family structure and within the scientific world. This will hopefully continue with death education in the schools and within the family structure.

William Worden and William Proctor wrote a book in 1976, which dealt with Personal Death Awareness. He

states that the level of awareness depends on how often an individual thinks about death, on how many deaths they have experienced, and on their views towards death. In his book, Worden and Proctor give a step by step guide to becoming more aware of your own death. The book was created to assist educators in teachings of death. In the long run, or to gain a high level of awareness, one must face the issue head on, and learn not to be afraid and trust in his/her beliefs of death.

Even though our society still does not openly discuss the issue of death, the discussions have been growing in the past twenty-five years. Very few studies have been done that deal with the actual issue of awareness (or at least I have not been able to find them)(Kubler-Ross & Worden, 1977). There have been a lot that deal with what it is like to die(Kubler-Ross & Worden, 1977) and perceptions toward death (Vickio, Cavanaugh, & Attig, 1990), but none that I could find that dealt solely with awareness levels. This is understandable, because of only the recent tends in death education.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the level of Death Awareness among college age students. It was hypothesized that individuals in this age

bracket have a low level of Death Awareness.

Method

Subjects

A total of 125 surveys were distributed randomly to three large dormitories on a midwestern university. Sixty-four completed surveys were received. The mean age of the students was 19.5 years old (ranging between 17 and 24), and the mean present year of school was 14.3 (with undergraduate and graduate responses). Females constituted 84.4% of the sample.

Measure

The survey (which I created) consisted of questions about the number of deaths the student had experienced in his/her life time, whether or not the student had ever been to a funeral, how often the student thought of his/her own death, what makes the student think about death, etc. The questions either asked for a number or a yes or no answer. The survey also included demographic items. The level of Death Awareness was measured by adding up all the "yes" answers to the questions (each "yes" was worth one point) and the number of death experienced. A number was given to each student. The questions that were not

included were, "How often do you think about your own death?", and "What usually brings on these thoughts?"

Validity of the survey was established by four expert individuals that deal with death everyday. Reliability of the survey was not established because of lack of time and funds to retest the sample population, and because of the yes/no format. A copy of the survey is provided at the end of this report.

Results

The results from the survey were quite different than the I expected. The students were asked to state the number of deaths they had experienced. The average number of deaths reported was 5.16 (SD=2.88); in a study done by Vickio, Cavanaugh, and Attig, they reported that students at this age level reported an average of 7 deaths (1990).

The responses to the question of "how often" death was thought of was as follows: 9.4% said never, 81.3% said once in a while, 9.4% said a lot, and 0% said always.

There was ten different ways to respond to the question of what "usually brought on" death thoughts. The following are out of the 64 respondents (not a

percentage). "A death of someone close" made the student think of his/her own death, 24 (out of 64) said yes to this reason. "A close call (a car accident, etc.)," 14 said yes to this reason. "A threat to my safety/ life (rape, attack, etc.)," 6 said yes. "An article or book on death," 5 said yes to this reason. "A movie or T.V. show dealing with death," 14 said yes to this reason. "A class about death," 2 said yes. "A personal obsession with death," 4 said yes. "I'm not sure what makes me think of death," 10 said yes to this reason. "I do not think of death," 5 said this. And finally, 11 students gave other reasons why they thought of death.

The range for the level of Death Awareness was between 5 and 16. The average score was 12.4 (SD=2.7). Remember, the score was figured by the number of "yes" questions and the number of deaths experienced. The range for low awareness was between 1 and 8. The range for middle level awareness was between 9 and 13. The range for high awareness was between 14 and 20 (Worden & Proctor, 1976). Therefore, the average lies in the middle level of Death Awareness. The other questions are outlined in Table 1.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the level of Death Awareness among college age students. The study showed that students in the midwestern university have experienced on a average 5.16 deaths in their life time. The percentage of students who reported that they thought of their own death "once in a while," was quite high (81.3%). But what do they think about? And how long do these thoughts stick around? These are both questions that could be researched in the future. The percentage of students who remembered a period of mourning after an experienced death was 76.6%, but 73.4% were not aware of any typical mourning process they have used in the past. How is this possible? Therefore, I feel that our society says we should mourn, but people really don't understand what mourning is. Everyone mourns in one way or another. According to Vickio, Cavanaugh, and Attig's study, they concluded that many university students possess awareness of the various facets of the grief process, including the emotional, physical, interpersonal, and temporal features (1990). This may be true, but it is not shown in this study, at least by this question. In the future if I were to redo this

study, this would be something I would include. I would like to see if even though people can see the mourning process in others, can they see it in themselves?

When the "yes" answers and the number of deaths are added up, that gave me an idea of the level of awareness each student had about death. Again, the average level was at 12.4 (SD=2.7), which fell in the middle (moderate) range (between 9 and 13) (Worden & Proctor, 1976). This was a shock to me because, as the hypothesis states, I thought that individuals at this age rarely thought of their own death, and were at a low level of Death Awareness. I was especially surprised at the number of people who thought of their own death "once in a while" (81.3%). If the hypothesis were true this percentage would be low, according to Worden and Proctor (1976). In conclusion, this study has shown that college students at this midwestern university have a moderate level of Death Awareness. In the future I hope to expand this study to cover all the ages. I feel that the subject of awareness is an important one, and one that all people involved could learn from.

References

Aries, P. (1974). Western attitudes toward death from the middle ages to the present. London, England: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Becker, E. (1973). The denial of death. New York: The Free Press.

Kubler-Ross, E., & Worden, W. (1977). Attitudes and experiences of death workshop attendees. Omega, 8, 91-106.

Marks, A., & Calder, B. (1982). Attitudes toward death and funerals. Evanston, Illinois: The Center for Marketing Sciences.

Prunkl, P., & Berry, R. (1989). Death week: Exploring the dying process. New York: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation.

Stannard, D. (1975). Death in America. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Vickio, C., Cavanaugh, J., & Attig, T. (1990). Perceptions of grief among university student. Death Studies, 14, 231-240.

Worden, W., & Proctor, W. (1976). PDA: Personal Death Awareness. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Zinner, E. (1985). Coping with death on campus. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.

Table 1

Question Number	Yes	No
Have you ever had a close family member die?	71.9%	28.1%
If not, do you know someone who has died?	56.3%	N/A
Have you ever been to a funeral?	95.3%	4.7%
Do you remember a mourning period for any death?	76.6%	23.4%
Do you believe that period was a difficult time for you?	76.6%	18.8%
Are you aware of any 'typical' mourning process that you use?	23.4%	73.4%
Have you ever thought of the death of someone close to you?	98.4%	1.6%
Would you consider these thoughts 'worrying?'	64.1%	34.4%
Have you ever thought of your own death?	85.9%	14.1%
Are you afraid to die?	39.1%	56.3%
Do you worry about your own death?	32.8%	65.6%
If there were a Bereavement/Grief Counselor made available to you, would you use this service?	59.4%	32.8%

** Some percents may not add up to 100% because of blank responses.

Hi! My name is Hillary,

and I would appreciate it if you would take a few minutes and complete this survey. I know you are a busy person, BUT I need your help. This survey is for my research class (XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX), and I am interested in the college students' **Awareness Of Death.** When finished with this survey, please mail it to me through Campus Mail, at the address on the back by Nov. 19, 1993. All you need to do is fold this paper up and stick it in the mail slot... probably the easiest thing you had to do all semester!! Thanks for your time, and have a GREAT holiday season. Hillary Scott

---

Male____ Female ____ Age _____ College Year _____

Please answer "Y" for Yes and "N" for No.

_____ Have you ever had a close family member die?
_____ If not, do you know someone who has died?
_____ How many deaths have you experienced? Please answer with a NUMBER.
_____ Have you ever been to a funeral?
_____ Do you remember a mourning period for any death?
_____ Do you believe that period was a difficult time for you?
_____ Are you aware of any "typical" mourning process that you use?
_____ Have you ever thought of the death of someone close to you?
_____ Would you consider these thoughts "worrying?"
_____ Have you ever thought of your own death?
_____ Are you afraid to die?
_____ Do you worry about your own death?

How often do you think about your own death? Please check one...
Never ____ Once in awhile ____ A lot ____ Always ____

What usually brings on these thoughts? Please check ONE...
_____ A death of someone I know.
_____ A close call (a car accident, etc.).
_____ A threat to my safety/life (rape, attack, etc.).
_____ An article or book on death.
_____ A movie or T.V. show dealing with death.
_____ A class about death.
_____ A personal obsession with death.
_____ I'm not sure what makes me think of death.
_____ I do not think of death.
_____ Other _____

_____ If there were a Bereavement / Grief Counselor made available to you, would you use this service?

Thanks Again!!!